

# Personal and Work Performance Outcomes of Employee Assistance Services

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## Abstract

This applied naturalistic study assessed the outcomes of employee assistance program (EAP) services delivered primarily by telephone. Follow-up survey data was analyzed from a large national sample (N = 1,050) in year 1999. Results showed that over two-thirds of employees reported improvements in their stress, well-being, daily functioning, and work performance after use of the service.

## Statement of the Problem

Employees often have personal issues associated with mental health, substance abuse, family and daily life. In the past three decades, employers have responded to this need by offering professional problem assessment and referral services to help employees resolve personal problems affecting work performance.

These services are called Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). Recent estimates indicate that 80% of workers in America now have EAP services available through their employer (Oher, 1999). In spite of their widespread use, there has been little empirical investigation of the outcomes of these services, especially of EAP services delivered over the telephone (Attridge, 2000). This applied study was done to help fill this gap in the literature by exploring how the use of employee assistance services impacts employees.

## Sample

The study involves a national sample of 1,050 employees who had voluntarily used a telephonic employee assistance program in the year 1999. The sample was comprised of 70% females and 30% males, client average age of 36 years (18-65). In this study, five problem areas could be assessed for each case. The most common problem area was personal and daily living issues (43%), which includes marital relationships, close relationships, legal problems, financial issues and family care. Mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, were also common (36%). Physical health issues (10%), individual work problems (16%) and organizational level work problems (4%) were also experienced.

## Procedure

The data for this study was part of a larger dataset from a major employee assistance service provider (Optum<sup>®</sup>). This company provides services to over 1,000 employers in the U.S. Masters-level counselors were available by phone 24-hours a day, 7-days a week. Telephone sessions included a problem assessment process and discussion of appropriate options for addressing the client's issues. About 15% of cases also had in-person sessions with an EAP counselor. About a third of all cases were referred on for intensive care from mental health or substance abuse services covered by the individual's health care insurance benefit. On a routine basis, about

10% of cases are randomly selected for follow-up research. A third-party survey firm conducted structured telephone interviews of these clients.

## Results

Items on the survey asked employees how their personal and work lives were affected by the service. Results showed that the majority of employees who contacted the EAP reported positive outcomes on all areas assessed. Specifically, employees reported:

- decreased stress (75%)
  - improved health and well-being (73%)
  - improved performance of routine daily activities (67%)
  - improved work productivity (72%)
  - avoided absenteeism from work (60%).
- All of these outcomes were positively correlated ( $r = .09$  to  $.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Respondents rated their productivity on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 = least productive ever been and 10 = most productive ever been. Among those with an improvement in productivity after use of the EAP service, the average rating went from 4.70 for the period before use of the counselor to 8.21 for the period after use. This increase was significant (paired t-test at the  $p < .001$  level) and represents a 43% gain in productivity. Among the 60% of cases who avoided missing time off from work, the average amount of time not lost from work due to use of the EAP service was 17 hours.

## Conclusions

This study explored the outcomes reported by a national random sample of over 1000 employees who used an employee assistance service. The majority of employees reported improvements in personal areas and work performance. All of these outcomes were significantly positively correlated.

This significance of this study is threefold:

- First, it is one of the first large-scale assessments of outcomes for *telephone-based* counseling assessment, information and referral services.
- Second, these findings offer empirical support for the argument that workplace performance outcomes are associated with improvements in the personal health of employees.
- Third, the results in this study were also successfully replicated in another study of 1,251 cases from the same EAP provider in year 2000 (Attridge, 2001).